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Stumbling blocks to making long-range foreign policy in the US

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The United States sports the world's most efficient systems for instant international crisis management: sophisticated intelligence sensors; instant communications; mobile forces; and innate organizational ability to make an informed, immediate response to many challenges.

But the same cannot be said of its long-range planning capacities.

Failures over time of US initiatives in Vietnam, Palestine, Lebanon, and potentially, Nicaragua highlight a seeming obliviousness to longer-range implications of its actions.

ANALYSIS

As stated by Robert Hunter of Georgetown's Center for Strategic and International Studies: "Planning has indeed long been the *bête noire* of US foreign policy — always recognized as valuable, always attempted, never particularly successful beyond the enunciation of general goals in documents like national security decision directives."

The roots of the problem are threefold: a habit of forming most policies only in response to crisis situations; institutional weaknesses; and the unusual influence in a melting pot democracy of erratic domestic political pressures.

All too often a crisis motivates the US to adopt a strategy that turns out to have unintended future repercussions. The rules of engagement for US forces in Lebanon led, for instance, to an identification of US power with the Christian parties in that country's civil war.

Once tentatively chosen, predictions of a strategy's long-term impact by individuals not committed to it is rare or tends to go unheeded. And the entire range of options are evolved as specific solutions for the immediate crisis. Attention to future effects is distinctly secondary.

The difficulty is also institutional. Offices charged with long-range planning are often swept up into more rewarding day-to-day operations or become irrelevant and staffed by officers with little clout. Rare indeed is the bureau that can sustain a strategic viewpoint and retain its effectiveness over time.

Strategic thinking and current management rarely mix well. Any worthwhile planning office views the world differently from those charged with day-to-day management. Built-in conflicts over hallowed policies ensue. Almost always outranked and outmanned, policy planning offices usually lose such conflicts.

Yet, decisions made today do form policy. To keep policy planners out of the loop in current activity is to doom them to irrelevance.

Thinking ahead is downright risky to one's career if proven wrong. It also is far less rewarded than frenetic involvement in compelling issues of immediate concern. Senior officials don't have to address next year's issues today. But they must address today's issues today.

This policy blind spot is paralleled for different reasons in the intelligence bureaus. There are, to be sure, estimates of future trends issued by various agencies singly and collectively. But many officials criticize these documents as unduly cautious in predicting radical de-

partures from easily identifiable current trends.

Intelligence has been used as a scapegoat for policy failures based on faulty assessments. Failure to predict the Iranian revolution, for instance, was held in part responsible for ineffective policies in that country. Whether justified or not, the cumulative effect of such finger-pointing is to produce very strong, protective instincts within the career intelligence leadership. Chancy, long-range forecasting does not flourish in this climate.

As Stanford University's Henry Rowan, former chairman of the National Intelligence Council, has said: "Most intelligence analyses are conservative. Because of this, they are usually correct. But when wrong, the ramifications are spectacular. Policy officials and intelligence analysts should think through a variety of optional futures, to shake them up about potential disasters as well as opportunities for creative action."

The extent to which foreign policymaking is influenced by domestic political considerations is considerable. The need for an immediate foreign policy "victory" can be compelling indeed. But should this need influence intelligence judgments, it can be dangerous. Perhaps more insidious and common, a politically unpleasant analysis can be simply ignored by policy personnel.

Moreover, the interests of ethnic groups may or may not be identical with those of the US generally — although they will always sincerely purport to be. Congressional responsiveness to Israeli and Greek lobbies exemplify this. Few other nations are as intensely affected by this phenomenon as the US. And its net impact is to inject a "wild card" element into the planning process.

Some observers have suggested an interagency policy planning council as a partial remedy. Dr. Hunter recommends a senior planning council, composed of career officials of deputy secretary rank and housed in the White House. He suggests that officials be immune from termination, transfer, or automatic irrelevancy with each change of administration. This, of course, may be impossible in the politically charged atmosphere associated with most presidential changes.

Such an institutional change would work only if top US leaders changed their outlook on the worth of strategic planning. Typical comments of those currently involved in policy planning offices — "I'm too busy on immediate issues to theorize;" "Promotions go to those who run things, not to those who plan" — are symptomatic of the leadership's preoccupations with day to day events.

A strong strategic planning organization would quickly arouse opposition. Entrenched interests would feel their policies threatened by the organization's mandate for free-thinking and independent access to senior policymakers. The office could be branded as biased. But many who have long since thrown up their hands at the practicality of effective strategic planning would applaud such an effort.

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